

Ranking Member Brian Higgins - Opening Statement Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

Assessing the Threat to the Homeland from al Qaeda Operations in Iran and Syria

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Assessing the threat to the United States from Al Qaeda operatives in Iran and Syria is uncharted territory for this subcommittee. Even though exploring this subject is new to the subcommittee, I believe it is our responsibility and I thank the Chairman for agreeing to hold this hearing.

On April 22, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police announced an arrest of two people in connection with plotting a terrorist attack on a passenger train that travels from Toronto, through Niagara Falls, into New York City. According to the RCMP, the alleged terrorists were receiving assistance from Al Qaeda elements in Iran. The RCMP stated that there was no connection to state sponsorship. If these allegations are true, it would mark the first time Al Qaeda elements in Iran directed a plot at the West.

Soon after the news of the arrests of the terrorists broke, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman stated that there is no firm evidence of any Iranian involvement and groups such as Al Qaeda have no compatibility with Iran in both political and ideological fields.

Iran is a Shia majority country, only about 8 to 10 percent of the population is Sunni and Al Qaeda is a Sunni organization. Even though there are political and ideological differences between Iran and Al Qaeda, there is a need to look deeper at their relationships.

Iran is home to Al Qaeda operatives. In 2001, when United States government took out the Taliban government in Afghanistan, many of Usama Bin Laden's family members and top lieutenants self-exiled to Iran. In the past, Iran kept a very close eye on all Al Qaeda figures in the country. Iranian intelligence services had access to all communications and contacts.

However, these restrictions have been loosened. And this should raise questions about whether Al Qaeda operatives in Iran are making trips outside of the country to make connections with the broader terror network.

As we evaluate Al Qaeda's relationship with Iran, we must be sure not to look at it in a myopic view. We need to evaluate both Al Qaeda's and Iran's relationships with other areas of the Middle East, especially areas of conflict.

Hezbollah, a terrorist organization supported by Iran, has a growing and active role in war torn Syria. Hezbollah is an ally of President Assad and is aiding government forces in Syria. Al Qaeda operatives, on the other hand, have been traveling to Syria to bring down the Syrian regime. As the violence grows in Syria, it becomes more sectarian, bringing Hezbollah and Al Qaeda fighting face to face with each other.

Will the conflict between Iranian backed Hezbollah and Al Qaeda elements in Syria have a grave effect on the United States? What will this conflict do to Al Qaeda's relationship with Iran?

As the recent Canadian plot brings questions about Al Qaeda's role in both Iran and Syria, there are still questions that should be raised about Al Qaeda's effect in the West. The recent plot in Canada also brings the question of whether Al Qaeda operatives in Iran have a broader terror network, and if Canada serves as their target for terrorist activity and recruitment.

Canada being a target for terrorist activity and recruitment is startling because a successful plot can cause catastrophic loss to the United States. In addition to the potential for innocent people from two countries being killed and injured, there is a possibility of grave damage to critical infrastructure and the economy.

The Peace Bridge in Buffalo is the busiest border crossing for automobiles in the United States. It is a local symbol and an architectural icon for the Buffalo Niagara region. It is one of America's busiest corridors for international travel and trade. Canada is the United States' #1 trading partner. In 2011, over 597.4 billion dollars of imports and exports were traded with Canada. Over 30 billion dollars of annual commerce travels through the Peace Bridge in Buffalo, Niagara region. This region is the first point of entry into the United States between Toronto and New York City, where the terrorists were attempting to attack.

The security of our border should be a priority and this means that first responders should be fully funded to prepare and prevent an attack. This also means that information that the federal government has related to a potential attack should be adequately shared with state and local partners. Having the information is key in preventing an attack from groups both foreign and domestic. We can expand our knowledge today.